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10 **METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR SETTING DOCUMENT-
 LINKED TIMED REMINDERS**

TECHNICAL FIELD

15 The present invention relates generally to the field of scheduling
applications, and more specifically to the field of timed reminders
associated with computer-readable files.

BACKGROUND

20 People have always jotted down notes to remind themselves of
appointments or tasks. Unfortunately, these notes are often lost or
misplaced, which leads to missed meetings or unfinished work. With
the advent of computers, electronic reminder applications gained
popularity. Several reminder applications display user-created notes or
information in a timely and efficient manner, permitting a user to create
25 and see a reminder without running the risk of losing a physical piece
of paper. This convenient and efficient method for scheduling tasks

allows a computer user to have complete confidence in his ability to create and view reminders for any situation, so long as he is able to access his computer.

However, these reminder applications are generally limited in scope. Many reminder applications are limited to simple text notes. That is, while several computer-executable applications may permit a user to create and schedule electronic reminders, they also limit the user to typing in a short note or other piece of information to serve as the reminder. Thus, in the case where a user wishes to resume editing a document at a later time, the user may create a reminder, but must then locate and open the document without any assistance from the reminder application. If the user has forgotten where the document is stored, this may lead to wasted time as the user attempts to locate the document or, in an extreme case, the inability to continue working if the document cannot be found.

To date, the inventors believe that the only applications which permit documents to be associated with a reminder are electronic mail programs, and then only in the case where the document is an electronic mail message. Thus, there is a need in the art for a means to schedule a reminder for a later date and time, and to associate a file with the reminder that may be accessed or otherwise manipulated when the reminder is activated.

Additionally, current reminder applications only function when the application itself is active on a computer. If the application is not running at the time the reminder is due to appear, then that reminder is delayed until the next time the application is active. This may also

lead to missed appointments and delayed work. Therefore, there is a need in the art for a means to create computer-based reminders, and to retrieve these reminders regardless of whether the reminder application is active.

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SUMMARY

The present invention is directed generally to a method and system for setting timed reminders linked to user documents. These timed reminders will open after a set period, permitting a user to see details
10 regarding a flagged document, as well as offering various options to a user in connection with either the document or the reminder itself. The flagged document may be any type of file generated by the application suite, whose contents in turn may have embedded executable macro(s) attached.

A user may create a reminder from any application that is a part of
15 an application suite. Typically, the reminder includes a time and date on which the user wishes to be reminded about a certain "flagged" file. The name of the file, along with the application associated with the file, is appended to the reminder. The reminder is stored in a shared database, which may be accessed by any application that is part of an overall
20 application suite.

Presuming that an application is active, the database is periodically polled to determine whether any reminders must be displayed. Reminders are displayed when the current system time matches the time and date specified by the user when the reminder was
25 created or last edited. If no application is active, a background

program may be run for the sole purpose of performing systematic checks of the database.

When a reminder is displayed, a first reminder dialog appears on the user's display screen. This reminder dialog typically includes the
5 time and date of the reminder, the name of the flagged file, the application associated with the flagged file, any notes added by the user, and buttons permitting the user to open the file, delay (or "snooze") the reminder, or delete the reminder. Additionally, a user may double-click the flagged document in order to access a second
10 reminder dialog that displays any notes the user may have added to the reminder.

Clicking the "open" button on the first reminder dialog instructs the system to launch the flagged file using whatever application is associated with the flagged file. This may result in the launch of an
15 application program not currently active. The user may additionally access reminders before the specified time and date to reschedule or delete a reminder. Further functionality permits the user to make a recurring reminder, which is activated at set intervals.

That the invention improves over the drawbacks of the prior art
20 and accomplishes the above objectives may be seen upon reading the specification.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 depicts an exemplary operating environment for an
25 exemplary embodiment of the present invention.

Fig. 2 depicts a block diagram of an exemplary embodiment of the present invention.

Fig. 3 depicts a screen display in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the present invention.

5 Fig. 4 depicts a screen display in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the present invention.

Fig. 5 depicts a screen display in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the present invention.

10 Fig. 6 depicts a logic flow diagram displaying the operation of an exemplary embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Generally speaking, the present invention is a method and system for creating timed reminders linked to computer-readable documents. More specifically, the present invention permits a user to
15 create a reminder for any date and time, and associate any data file with the reminder in such a manner that the file is automatically opened, executed, or read as applicable at the date and time specified in the reminder. Although the term “document” and “document-linked
20 reminder” are used throughout this specification, any computer-readable file may be used with the present invention. This includes, but is not limited to, data files, program executable files, HTML files, graphics files, and so on. Thus, it may be seen that the term “document” is used as convenient shorthand for any computer-
25 readable file, rather than by means of restricting the present invention to word processor files.

A user may create a document-linked reminder from any application program that is a part of an application suite. Each program in the application suite typically has a hot button, menu item, link, or other means of initiating a reminder creation dialog. The reminder creation dialog permits a user to specify a time and date on which the reminder will activate, and an associated file. The reminder is then stored in a database. The reminder creation dialog may be later accessed in order to create additional reminders, or to edit the time, date, or associated file for existing reminders, or to remove the reminder.

Periodically, the document reminder system will poll the database in order to determine whether any reminders need to be activated. The document reminder system performs this task by polling the database during idle CPU cycles or as a background computing task. In the exemplary embodiment, this polling is typically carried out via at least one application within the application suite. Thus, an application comprising a portion of the suite must be active in order to poll the database for the presence of any imminent reminders. In the event that no portion of the application suite is active, the exemplary embodiment may launch a background program for the sole purpose of checking the database at set intervals for the presence of reminders whose time and date fields match the current time and date.

At the time and date specified, the reminder will be displayed, along with the name of the associated file and a variety of reminder options. In an exemplary embodiment, these options include the

ability to reschedule, delete, or delay the reminder, as well as the ability to launch or otherwise execute the associated file.

Exemplary Operating Environment

5 Fig. 1 and the following discussion are intended to provide a brief, general description of a suitable computing environment in which the invention may be implemented. While the invention will be described in the general context of application programs that run on an operating system in conjunction with a personal computer, those skilled in the art will recognize that the invention also may be
10 implemented in combination with other program modules. Generally, program modules include routines, programs, components, data structures, etc. that perform particular tasks or implement particular abstract data types. Moreover, those skilled in the art will appreciate that the invention may be practiced with other computer system
15 configurations, including hand-held devices, multiprocessor systems, microprocessor-based or programmable consumer electronics, minicomputers, mainframe computers, and the like. The invention may also be practiced in distributed computing environments where tasks are performed by remote processing devices that are linked
20 through a communications network. In a distributed computing environment, program modules may be located in both local and remote memory storage devices.

With reference to Fig. 1, an exemplary system for implementing
25 the invention includes a conventional personal computer **20**, including a processing unit **21**, a system memory **22**, and a system bus **23** that couples the system memory to the processing unit **21**. The system

memory **22** includes read only memory (ROM) **24** and random access memory (RAM) **25**. A basic input/output system **26** (BIOS), containing the basic routines that help to transfer information between elements within the personal computer **20**, such as during start-up, is stored in ROM **24**. The personal computer **20** further includes a hard disk drive **27**, a magnetic disk drive **28**, e.g., to read from or write to a removable disk **29**, and an optical disk drive **30**, e.g., for reading a CD-ROM disk **31** or to read from or write to other optical media. The hard disk drive **27**, magnetic disk drive **28**, and optical disk drive **30** are connected to the system bus **23** by a hard disk drive interface **32**, a magnetic disk drive interface **33**, and an optical drive interface **34**, respectively. The drives and their associated computer-readable media provide nonvolatile storage for the personal computer **20**. Although the description of computer-readable media above refers to a hard disk, a removable magnetic disk and a CD-ROM disk, it should be appreciated by those skilled in the art that other types of media which are readable by a computer, such as magnetic cassettes, flash memory cards, digital video disks, Bernoulli cartridges, and the like, may also be used in the exemplary operating environment.

A number of program modules may be stored in the drives and RAM **25**, including an operating system **35**, a reminder database **210**, a document reminder system **100**, and one or more dynamically linked libraries **38**. A user may enter commands and information into the personal computer **20** through conventional input devices, including a keyboard **40** and pointing device, such as a mouse **42**. Other input devices (not shown) may include a pen, touch-operated device,

microphone, joystick, game pad, satellite dish, scanner, or the like. These and other input devices are often connected to the processing unit **21** through a serial port interface **46** that is coupled to the system bus, but may be connected by other interfaces, such as a game port or a universal serial bus (USB). A display screen **47** or other type of display device is also connected to the system bus **23** via an interface, such as a video adapter **48**. In addition to the display screen **47**, personal computers typically include other peripheral output devices (not shown), such as speakers or printers.

The personal computer **20** may operate in a networked environment using logical connections to one or more remote computers, such as a remote computer **49**. The remote computer **49** may be a server, a router, a peer device or other common network node, and typically includes many or all of the elements described relative to the personal computer **20**, although only a memory storage device **50** has been illustrated in Fig. 1. The logical connections depicted in Fig. 1 include a local area network (LAN) **51** and a wide area network (WAN) **52**. Such networking environments are commonplace in offices, enterprise-wide computer networks, intranets and the Internet.

When used in a LAN networking environment, the personal computer **20** is connected to the LAN **51** through a network interface **53**. When used in a WAN networking environment, the personal computer **20** typically includes a modem **54** or other means for establishing communications over the WAN **52**, such as the Internet. The modem **54**, which may be internal or external, is connected to the

system bus **23** via the serial port interface **46**. In a networked environment, application programs depicted relative to the personal computer **20**, or portions thereof, may be stored in the remote memory storage device. It will be appreciated that the network connections
5 shown are exemplary and other means of establishing a communications link between the computers may be used.

Description of an Exemplary Embodiment

Fig. 2 displays a block diagram of an exemplary embodiment of
10 the current invention. The document reminder system **100** consists of a database **210**, an application suite **280**, and a user interface **220**. The database **210** stores any reminders **200** created by a user of the application suite **280**. Thus, the database may be shared by any and all of the applications in the application suite.

15 A user may create a document-linked reminder **200** from any portion of the application suite **280**. Each application within the application suite typically has a button, menu item, command, or other means to access a document-linked reminder creation dialog. The document-linked reminder creation dialog is discussed in greater detail
20 with respect to Fig. 3. Thus, a user may access this dialog while working with a word processor **250**, a drawing program **260**, a spreadsheet program **270**, or an email application **240**. The document-linked reminder **200** contains a specified time and date on which the reminder is to appear. Additionally, the document-linked reminder
25 contains an alias pointing to the associated document. In this manner, when the reminder reappears on the specified time and date, the document may also be accessed from the reminder **200** through the use

of the alias. An “alias” is a shortcut or other means by which a computer-executable file may be accessed from a remote location or directory other than the directory in which the original document resides. The concept of accessing a document from within a document-linked reminder **200** is discussed in greater detail with respect to Fig. 4.

In the exemplary embodiment of the document reminder system **100**, a user creating a document through any portion of the application suite **280** accesses exactly the same dialog, no matter which component application **240, 250, 260, 270** is employed to initiate creation of the document-linked reminder **200**. From the user’s perspective, creating a document-linked reminder **200** always follows the same process. However, depending on which application **240, 250, 260, 270** the user selects to create the document-linked reminder, the creation and storage of the reminder may be handled differently by the document reminder system **100**. In the exemplary embodiment, most application suite **280** elements interface with the database **210** through an application suite host **230**. The application suite host **230** is responsible for displaying the document-linked reminder creation dialog, creating the document-linked reminder **200**, and generally providing an interface between an application **250, 260, 270** and the database **210**. In the exemplary embodiment, the electronic mail messaging application **240** may communicate directly with the database **210**, rather than employing the application suite host **230** as an intermediary, although this is done as a matter of convenience rather than necessity. Alternate embodiments may permit any or all

portions of the application suite **280** to interface with the database **210** directly.

Once the document-linked reminder **200** is created and the time, date, and associated document are specified, the reminder is stored in the database **210**. In an exemplary embodiment, the date and time at which the reminder is activated are stored in the database, along with the name of the associated document. In the exemplary embodiment, document-linked reminders **200** are stored and indexed through the use of a file system specification, or "FSSpec." The FSSpec keeps track of the volume on which the document is stored, as well as the document's exact location on that volume. As the document is moved (via saving the document in a new location, system cleanup activities, disk space reallocation, and so on), the FSSpec is updated to point to the document's new location. The FSSpec keeps track of the document's current location even if the document is moved from one folder or location to another. Alternate embodiments may employ various methods of tracking the document's location. For example, the document reminder system **100** may keep a running list of current file paths in accordance with the file designations for the active operating system **35**.

Periodically, the document reminder system will poll the database in order to determine whether any reminders need to be activated. The document reminder system performs this task by polling the database during idle CPU cycles or as a background computing task. In the exemplary embodiment, this polling is typically carried out via at least one application within the application suite.

Thus, an application comprising a portion of the suite must be active in order to poll the database for the presence of any imminent reminders. In the event that no portion of the application suite is active, the exemplary embodiment may launch a background program **290** for the sole purpose of checking the database at set intervals for the presence of reminders whose time and date fields match the current time and date.

An alternate embodiment of the document reminder system **100** may also include a user interface **220** which permits a user to directly manipulate reminders **200** present in the database **210**, without going through the application suite **280**. In an alternate embodiment, the user interface **220** may initiate either a document-linked reminder creation dialog, as shown in Fig. 3, or a document-linked reminder editing dialog, as shown in Fig. 5.

The Reminder Creation Dialog

Fig. 3 displays the reminder creation dialog **300**. As previously mentioned, this dialog may be accessed either from any of the applications **240, 250, 260, 270** comprising the application suite **280**, or from the user interface **220**. The reminder creation dialog **300** is typically used to create a reminder **200** and store the reminder in the database **210** for later retrieval.

The reminder creation dialog **300** contains a checkbox **310**, a date field **320**, and a time field **330**. A user may specify a time in the time field **330** and a date in the date field **320** at which he desires the reminder to be retrieved from the database **210** by the document

reminder system **100** and displayed. Once these fields contain a value, the user may check the checkbox **310**, which in turn sets the reminder **200** as “active.” Only active reminders are retrieved and displayed. The reminder **200** is automatically associated with whichever
 5 document is currently displayed in the application **240, 250, 260, 270** used to create the reminder. The user may subsequently invoke the reminder creation dialog **300** and clear the check box, which results in removing the reminder from the database.

10 The Reminder Dialog

When the document reminder system **100** detects that the date **320** and time **330** fields of a reminder **200** stored in the database **210** match the current date and time, the system retrieves the reminder and displays a reminder dialog **400**. An example of the reminder dialog is
 15 shown in Fig. 4.

Generally speaking, the reminder dialog **400** consists of a toolbar **460**, a subject field **410**, and a due date field **420**. The time and date entered in the time field **330** and the date field **320** of the reminder creation dialog **300** are jointly displayed in the due date field
 20 **420**. The name of the associated document is shown in the subject field **410**. These two fields permit a user to quickly and easily identify the reason the reminder has been activated and the due date of the reminder.

The user may employ the toolbar **460** to perform a variety of
 25 operations on the reminder **200**. For example, clicking the open item button **430** contained within the toolbar will launch whatever

application is necessary to view the document listed in the subject field **410**, if the application is not active. In the event that the document is itself an executable file, the document will be launched. In the further event that the document is not an executable file, and there is no
 5 known application to display the document, then document will remain dormant.

The snooze button **440** is also present on the toolbar **460** of the exemplary embodiment. Clicking the snooze button returns the reminder **200** to the database **210**, and removes the displayed reminder
 10 from sight. After a fixed interval, the reminder **200** will again be retrieved from the database and displayed. This fixed interval may vary between embodiments. Alternately, the user may also choose the length of time until the reminder is redisplayed. In the exemplary embodiment, the user may select a custom interval via a drop-down
 15 menu (not shown).

The final portion of the exemplary embodiment's toolbar **460** is the dismiss button **450**. Clicking the dismiss button **450** may delete the reminder **200** from the database **210** and remove the reminder from display. Alternately, if the reminder **200** is tied to a second display,
 20 such as a calendar entry, the reminder itself may remain in the database **210** so long as the calendar entry is active. Whether or not the reminder **200** is actually deleted, clicking the dismiss button **450** ensures that the reminder **200** will not be redisplayed at a later time.

25 The Edit Reminder Dialog

A user may also edit previously created reminders **200**. In order to do so, a user of the exemplary embodiment accesses the reminder

editing dialog **500**, shown in Fig. 5. The reminder editing dialog **500** may be accessed either from the user interface **220**, or from any portion of the application suite **280**. Additionally, an exemplary embodiment may permit a user to access the edit reminder dialog by
5 double-clicking on the subject field **410** of the reminder dialog **400**.

The reminder editing dialog **500** displays the name of the associated document in the task field **510**. From the reminder editing dialog **500**, the user may alter the reminder **200** in a number of ways. First, the user may delete the reminder by clicking on the delete button
10 **550**. Second, the user may add a note to the reminder by typing in the note field **570**. Any notes added will be displayed the next time the reminder **200** is opened in the reminder editing dialog **500**. Third, the user may schedule the reminder **200** as a recurring reminder by clicking the recurring task field **560**. Designating a reminder **200** as a
15 recurring task instructs the document reminder system **100** to display the reminder at recurring intervals, as specified by the user. Finally, a user may alter the time and/or date for displaying the reminder **200** by entering a new time and/or date in the time/date display field **520**. Once a user has completed editing the reminder **200**, he may choose to
20 save the reminder by clicking the save button **540**, or to delete the reminder by clicking the delete button **550**.

Alternate embodiments may permit additional functionality to be accessed from the reminder editing dialog **500**. An alternate embodiment may permit a reminder to initiate an action other than
25 simply opening a document. For example, a reminder may initiate actions such as publishing data to a webpage periodically. Presume

that a user wishes to update a spreadsheet every Friday. So long as a data source may be accessed by the reminder **200**, an “auto-updating” reminder may not only open the associated document, but initiate a preset number of changes to the document to reflect weekly changes in underlying data, and then publish the changed data to a web page.

Logical Operation of an Exemplary Embodiment

Fig. 6 displays a flowchart of the steps required to monitor the database **210**, retrieve any current reminders **200**, and display any associated documents. The routine **600** shown in Fig. 6 is performed by an exemplary embodiment of the present invention. The routine **600** begins in “start” step **605**, where the logic routine is initiated. Following step **605**, step **610** is accessed, wherein a timer is set to zero.

After step **610**, the document reminder system **100** executes decision step **615**. In step **615**, the system **100** must determine whether any application **240, 250, 260, 270** is currently active which may poll the database **210**. If such an application is active, then step **625** is accessed. Otherwise, step **620** is initiated, in which the system **100** launches a background program **290**. The background program is solely dedicated to polling the database **210** and executing steps **625** through **650**, as detailed below.

In step **625**, the document reminder system **100** employs either an active application **240, 250, 260, 270** or the background program **290** to determine whether a reminder exists in the database **210** wherein the entries in the time field **330** and date field **320** match the

current date and time. If not, then step **630** is accessed. If so, then step **635** is executed.

In step **630**, the document reminder system **100** increments the timer before returning to decision step **625**. The timer increment may vary in size from one embodiment to another. Generally speaking, the timer is incremented by the smallest amount permitted by the personal computer **20** on which the document reminder system **100** is running.

The document reminder system **100** executes step **635** following a positive determination in step **625**. In this step, the reminder **200** is retrieved from the database **210** and displayed on the display screen **47**. The system then proceeds to step **640**, wherein the system **100** awaits a user input indicating that the associated document should be retrieved. Once the user input is received by the system, decision step **645** is accessed.

In step **645**, the document reminder system **100** must determine whether the application **240, 250, 260, 270** necessary to display the document associated with the reminder **200** is already active or not. In the event that the application is not running, step **655** is executed and the necessary application is opened. After step **655**, step **650** is accessed. If the required application **240, 250, 260, 270** is active, then the system **100** skips step **655** and proceeds directly to step **650**. In step **650**, the document is displayed in the appropriate application. Following step **650**, the timer is incremented in step **630** and the reminder determination loop of steps **625** through **655** is repeated.

Conclusion

The document reminder system **100** may include additional functionality not herein specifically described. For example, the system may allow a user to schedule a recurring reminder directly from the reminder creation dialog **300**, rather than from the reminder editing dialog **500**. Many other modifications and additional features will become evident in view of the preceding description of the embodiments of the invention. It should be understood, therefore, that the foregoing relates only to certain embodiments of the invention, and that numerous changes may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the following claims.